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# Walking the Spiritual Ways – West of Ireland experience of modern pilgrimage

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Rosemary Power worked until recently in County Clare, Ireland, on behalf of the Methodist Church. Part of her work was to develop pilgrim routes and to provide the historical background to them in a context suitable for modern pilgrimage. She is an Associate Researcher of the Centre for Classical Medieval and Pre-Modern Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway, and publishes academically on medieval studies, as a Norse-Gaelic specialist; on folk tradition; and for a wider audience on contemporary spirituality and contextual theology. She worked in England, with the public, civic, church and voluntary sectors, especially in areas of economic deprivation.

This reflective paper considers the modern phenomenon of pilgrim walking along routes in the west of Ireland county of Clare. It relates it to possible medieval practice; to traditional practices by local people on one hand and the reconstruction of international medieval pilgrim routes to places like Compostela. It suggests the reasons why people may walk in search of spiritual growth and experience, the resources they may wish for, the ways in which the contemporary search functions in a largely post-Catholic manner, and the position of those from other Christian, or religious traditions..

**Keywords:** Pilgrim routes, Celtic spirituality, contemporary religion

## Introduction

*Shall I go, O King of the Mysteries, after my fill  
of cushions and music, to turn my face on the  
shore and my back on my native land? . . . Shall  
I take my little black curragh over the broad-  
breasted, glorious ocean? O King of the bright  
kingdom, shall I go of my own choice upon the  
sea?*

These questions are asked in a poem attributed to the scholarly bishop-king of Cashel, Cormac Mac Cuileannáin, who was killed in 903 AD (Greene and O'Connor, 1967: 151-3). The speaker goes on to question of the costs of journeying for the love of God, of the sacrifices he will make of lifestyle and comfort, the dangers of the journey, and, given the society he came from, the cost of exile, of being unknown among strangers, without the status and family support that were integral to his time and culture.

The poem was probably written over two centuries later – the language is Classical rather than Old Irish. There are layers of purpose and significance here which must affect any historical interpretation. There is the Christian recognition of the dilemma of the rich

young man in the Gospels. Then there is the honour felt due to this bishop-king; the royal pilgrimages from Ireland to Rome of the eleventh and twelfth centuries; and the increased religious status of Cashel when it was in 1103 given to the Irish church by a king of the dynasty that supplanted Cormac's. Then there is the aesthetic pleasure that may be obtained today in reading a finely-constructed poem; and an appreciation of modern usage such as its setting to music and modernised speech (as by Davey, 1992). An espouser of modern Celtic spirituality may find in it an image of the voyage of Saint Brendan in the sixth century, if ever (Adam, 2000; Power, 2010); and it has a relevance to the widespread modern desire to be a pilgrim.

This paper examines the concept of modern pilgrimage in the largely Catholic context of the west of Ireland county of Clare. Drawing on the experience of the author as a participant-observer, it considers the expectations of those who so journey, in groups or alone; how and when they journey; the impact on the local population and their interpretations of ancient sites which may be in use as devotional centres and burial grounds and; the resources they need to interpret what they encounter. It then suggests ways in which the use of ancient resources, such as poetry and

architecture, can relate to the inner journey of those who walk these routes. This is, in effect, the presentation of raw data with preliminary scholarly assessment, drawn from the disciplines of folklore tradition, local history and contextual theology. Much is drawn from the writer's own experience in the west of Ireland and related to previous work undertaken on the popular focus of pilgrimage - the Island of Iona in the Scottish Hebrides (Power, 2010; 2013; 2015). It is the hope that these explorations will relate to the understanding of pilgrimage elsewhere, and in particular to the current revival and reconstruction of medieval European pilgrim routes.

## Pilgrimage

The word 'pilgrim' needs in this context to be understood in its full, traditional, sense, in which the religious context is crucial. A pilgrim is a wanderer, a searcher for whom the explicit, religious, destination is the given purpose, but the journey among strangers and the learning to know oneself on the way, are essential to the experience. These facets of pilgrimage remain topical for those setting off on their journeying, long or short, with the purpose of searching for the divine. This is a personal undertaking but one which had in the past considerable community implications. Yet, the term pilgrimage is now open to a variety of contemporary interpretations as to practice and spiritual purpose, and may cover many levels of physical and emotional engagement.

These are just some of the complexities that influence current experience in the west of Ireland and elsewhere of pilgrimage, places of arrival, and suitable routes on which to do it. There are many tensions, some creative, concerning the understanding of spirituality and who decides its content; the relations between formal historical interpretation of ancient sites; local usage and popular understanding, perhaps promoted by non-locals; access over privately-owned land or to buildings not in public control, such as churches; and the roles of the heritage sector and the tourism industry. It is important too to consider the interplay with walking and driving routes presented and maintained by public bodies, and their relevance to the pilgrimage walk, and the interpretation these bodies put upon ancient sites.

It may be worth considering the social background to the reflections in this paper, at least in the times before world recession. The 'gap year' journey had become a significant rite of transition for young westerners who could afford it, similar to the European Grand Tour of earlier generations. Within religious traditions, the desire for a similar rite of transition through pilgrimage is regaining its strength. It is based in Ireland in part on folk or modern popular tradition regarding locally well-known, sites of pilgrimage, and occasional longer

visits to famous international sites - both of which have always been significant in the vernacular Catholic tradition for people of all ages.

Given the extent to which in medieval times pilgrimage was part of the common tradition of Christendom, it is not surprising that this has been drawn on in recent decades. The journey to Compostela through northern Spain has been supplemented by the opening, or re-opening, of routes across Europe, and the ease of modern transport means that sections can be walked by people in different years rather than necessarily as a continuum. Additionally, there are significant numbers of people, many of them more robust than the average church-goer, who are taking their seeking for the spiritual seriously enough to walk strenuously. In this longer form, this is typically a modern holiday activity or one for youthful pensioners, as Europeans with jobs work too long hours with too limited breaks to engage; and those without work cannot afford the outlay nor the time away from the demands of their benefit systems.

There is no modern equivalent to the medieval preparation of settling one's affairs and taking time out to leave the normal pattern of life in favour of a lengthy and probably hazardous journey, undertaken for the good of one's soul and for the souls of those who cannot make the journey themselves.

From within modern Christian practice, there are certain ecclesiological considerations related to pilgrimage. Many of the expectations of church life are breaking down, in all denominations, and people are increasingly making their own, explicitly individualistic, spiritual searches. Side-by-side with this trend, church-organised 'pilgrimages' may basically be congregational outings, bus tours with a religious tinge, designed as communal activities for an older age-group. This we can expect to continue, for much of modern communal Christian practice appears increasingly focussed on events, on cultural matters that are engaged in with people of similar interests. These patterns are at variance with the traditional model of churches as gathered communities of believers and adherents. They lack the same regularity of meeting or emphasis on the Sunday morning: indeed the lack of common time in modern life would make that difficult. Increasingly it is also understood that church life is about time spent with people one chooses rather than those from the same geographical area (in the case of the latter one was once regarded as being automatically in spiritual community without choice). Pilgrimage is one way in which this modern capacity for spiritual choice can be expressed. While this is particularly marked in the Protestant traditions, it is a significant shift in contemporary Christian ecclesiology in general.

It is in practice relatively new in Ireland that the Protestant traditions engage in pilgrimage related spirituality at all, for the word 'pilgrimage' has Catholic overtones, in particular in the North of Ireland. This would not only make many Protestants uneasy, but their presence may be seen, for historical as well as theological and devotional reasons, as jarring by traditional Catholics. Further, although many of the sites that are still used for regular religious worship are in Church of Ireland hands, the engagement of Non-Conformists, whose origins are mainly in the Pietist movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is new in this context. Finally, both the practice and understanding of religious practice by others are both decreasing rapidly in contemporary Ireland, so there are increasing numbers of people who may be attracted to pilgrimage sites without being aware of traditional expectations of how to act there. It may be helpful, therefore, to consider what is happening, what the attractions might be, and how this practice of pilgrimage walking fits with contemporary sociological and theological understandings.

Alongside this growing phenomenon are the members of Catholic parishes, mostly over the age of forty, who are restoring holy wells, sometimes with the support of a local community group and with public funding. In consequence, these traditional local places of veneration are sometimes being signposted, and may be made accessible to like-minded people coming in coach-parties from a distance. Some might even attract overseas visitors, whose understanding may not be in accord with expected practice at such sites. In some instances there are coach- and car-parks not far, such as at the signed base of Maméan, a traditional devotional site in the Conamara Maamturk Mountains, which is visited in particular during Holy Week (the week before Easter) by people from the west of Ireland. Most undertake the steep pilgrim walk on foot, though occasionally a quad-biker joins them.

Another reason for reflection concerns how we relate to the religious sites and landscape in a society where relatively few people engage in agriculture where both sites and public walking 'ways' are marked and provide access, while alternatives may be discouraged. We can consider how we relate to the plans of official bodies, the tourist industry, landowners, the formal and informal custodians of the landscape and heritage, and the vision or practice of other groups, some of them interested in spirituality but not necessarily Christian spirituality.

Even when spiritual needs remain the focus, whether it is desired by core members or not, a certain amount of commercial activity, focussed on tourists rather than pilgrims, can occur. Where the depth of experience is respected, though practiced by relatively few people, a larger group can be attracted to some aspects.

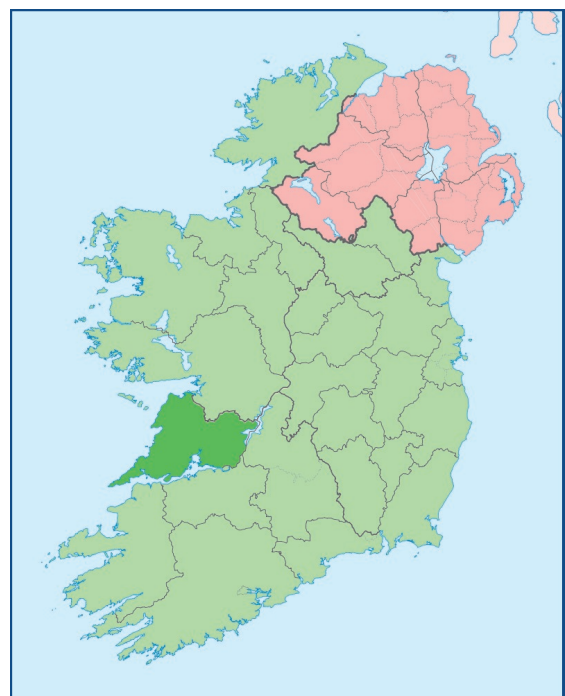
However, if a site becomes predominantly commercial, those who engage in the spiritual side may cease to come, and this will effectively diminish the attraction for the larger number of people who come as spiritual tourists.

The experience of this author in County Clare has led to a series of walks, and now books, which explore the pilgrimage theme while also providing both walking routes and interpretation of major sites, for both walkers and the local community. This has resulted in the author reflecting on the interest in prayer-walking, derived largely from her experience of rural walks that stop at ancient and other sites, and which explore the spirituality of the past in relation to contemporary concerns. In this writer's case it is based largely on what is developing in County Clare, but there is a wider pattern of rural prayer walks, and a variety of approaches to their development and usage. The vision of each is influenced by local or individual factors, though there appear to be some common threads. This is, then, an exploration of the praxis, action accompanied by reflection which is intended to lead to further action and reflection in a continuing spiral.

## County Clare

County Clare is particularly well-served with the description of historic sites by the antiquarian Thomas Westropp in the late nineteenth century (1900, see too Griffin 2003), while local historical societies have

**Figure 1 : Map of Ireland Highlighting County Clare**



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AIsland\\_of\\_Ireland\\_location\\_map\\_Clare.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AIsland_of_Ireland_location_map_Clare.svg)



**Figure 2 : Main Towns and Villages in County Clare**

Source : Google Maps

continued the interest, publishing journals with relevant articles (*The Other Clare*, 1977-). Local guide books can be drawn upon in addition to the standard historical apparatus, such as the extensive work of Peter Harbison over many years (Harbison 2005). Local knowledge of church sites and their significance is provided in handbook form by Olive Carey and Clodagh Lynch (Carey and Lynch, 2007), and extensive information about sites and their attributed founding saints has been published recently in academic form by Pádraig Ó Riain (Ó Riain, 2012).

Clare is a well-walked county. The northern part comprises the Burren, a landscape of exposed karst limestone broken by fertile patches which escaped glaciation in the last Ice Age. This unusual landscape has proved very attractive to walkers, as they travel across the bare 'pavement' rock broken by long natural furrows (a formation of clints and grykes), and up stepped limestone to the highest points. The limestone has many unique features including a micro-climate; unusual rock formations sculpted by water and wind; underground caving passages; 'turloughs' temporary lakes that form when the water below ground rises too high to be contained. There is also evidence of human activity on the light soils from the earliest times to the present day. Traditional practice include the winterage of cattle on this high and apparently barren land. The limestone absorbs heat

which is retained into the winter months, and allows the livestock to be dry-footed. The cattle in turn control the growth of hazel, the dominant tree, allowing the unique protected flora to generate. In the past there was some sheep-grazing; and the Burren is home to herds of feral goats.

County Clare also boasts a dramatic coastline, now part of the national 'Wild Atlantic Way' driving route, on which may be found Loop Head, which projects to the north of the Shannon estuary, and further north long beaches, some of them used by surfers, as at Lahinch. North again is the major tourist attraction of the seven-hundred foot high Cliffs of Moher. Less walked is the southern part of the coastline along the Shannon estuary. East Clare has low mountains of granite and Lough Derg, through which the River Shannon flows, and this part of the county is popular with boat-owners. While this article was in press two major County Clare sites received substantial consideration from public bodies as places which can attract more visitors and will be interpreted for them. Scattery Island in the west achieved special attention as part of the Wild Atlantic Way, while in East Clare Holy Island in Lough Derg, the site of a significant Early Christian monastery and previously in private hands as part of a farm, was acquired by the County Council.

The county is thus well set up for tourism, some of it large-scale such as at the Cliffs of Moher (1 million visitors in 2014), which is a coach-journey away from Galway, but the majority of the county relies on a steady but limited flow of people arriving as summer residents, tourist groups, or as individuals. The same is true of central Clare, where much of the research for this paper was undertaken. It again is suited to a limited number of visitors at any one time, with small-scale attractions, and contains a number of ancient sites on the lower edges of the Burren.

The national tourist authority, Fáilte Ireland, has concentrated on 'upgrading' Bed and Breakfast accommodation but this does not necessarily suit the walker, who requires the option to dry clothes and boots and to rest in comfort rather than luxury, probably on a limited budget; and to acquire not only an evening meal but portable food for the next day's walk. There are a number of hostels throughout the county, but it is not on the whole set up for the needs of long-distance walkers following a linear route.

### Prayer Walks in Clare

Over four years my Clare experience developed as prayer-walking rather than traditional pilgrimage. Through local contacts, the media and the internet, people were invited to take part along some or all of a designated route over a number of days. As with

church services there were no bookings, but the different stages of the walk were timed in order to enable others to join at specific points. Pauses were built in which allowed for the inclusion of relevant stories, scripture, historical narration, poems from ancient times, hymns and prayers relating to contemporary concerns, and where possible, input concerning the geology, plants and other wildlife of the locality.

People who joined the walks were invited if they wished to contribute their knowledge or otherwise take part. The intention was to recognise what people experience as the presence of the divine in the natural world, and what they encounter through the physical reminders in ruins or buildings of the faith practices of the past.

Some of the chosen routes and stopping places are traditional to pilgrims while others have a more recent significance. Not all stopping places are beautiful, and may include power stations or half-built houses. They may serve as a focus concerning contemporary society and, include international as well as local considerations. The events have so far attracted people of all backgrounds and levels of religious interest, and have included both local residents and people from further afield.

**Figure 3 : Cliffs of Moher, County Clare**



Source : [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cliffs\\_of\\_Moher,\\_Ireland\\_\(8577753321\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cliffs_of_Moher,_Ireland_(8577753321).jpg)



**Figure 4 : Holy Island, East Clare**

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:InisCealtraMonastery.JPG>

### ***Spirituality***

Considering the underlying reasons that have led to the pilgrim walks, one is that people are walking anyway as a leisure activity and many walkers consciously connect the act of walking and what they encounter with the spiritual. There are hill-walkers, many of whom belong to groups, and there are groups with an interest in plant life, historical sites, or stargazing. My Clare pilgrimages seek to incorporate some of these interests but to do so by drawing on the specifically spiritual impact, to make it central to the experience. This can be compared to many so-called 'Fresh Expressions' of contemporary Protestant church life which seek to make faith accessible through providing an activity familiar to what certain groups of people do already, seeking to articulate a the link with the spiritual through the activity.

The walks are advertised in a way that seeks to identify their Christian source while suggesting that they may be of interest to anyone interested in the spiritual, including those who may not participate in traditional

church life. They are undertaken in a context where there are numerous other walks which are also identified as spiritual, especially those organised by small businesses where they are part of a livelihood.

### ***Communality***

People who belong to groups that walk enjoy the company of people with similar interests; and this leads to a second reason. The process provides the communality, the doing things together that is central to Christian belief. Part of the purpose of such walks is that people can forge bonds by sharing their specific skills and knowledge along the route, and the sharing is part of the spiritual. The underlying process is that the walks are open to all comers, and each can contribute to the whole. Undertaking something physical together, with some common pattern, seems to allow people to share their concerns and sometimes their personal stories.

The routes suggested are not necessarily the original routes: those are often either on private land or on



roads too narrow and busy to recommend. The routes can be walked alone at other times, however, part of the essence of traditional pilgrimage is sharing along the route and arriving together.

In this, the model adopted in the rural west of Ireland differs substantially from what is being considered in contemporary urban prayer walks. In a city context, part of the experience is usually to walk with nowhere obvious to shelter from the weather and no money to pay for food. This is aimed at providing an experience with a view to action for social justice, a model which has been trialled in a number of major British cities. If the walkers are undertaking a route on the same day they may walk at best in twos or threes, perhaps taking the same route in a different order. Apart from the deliberate model of experiencing isolation, a group of strangers would appear intimidating in poorer residential areas. In an urban pilgrimage, therefore, sharing is likely to occur at the end of the day. In contrast, a rural walk can have the features of a traditional pilgrimage, of sharing experiences and knowledge, and probably also food, along the way.

Local rural residents are used to seeing groups of people walking and to some extent contributing to the local economy. Even if they do not themselves take

part, it may help to ensure that groups led by outsiders are doing something understandable rather than imposing their own interpretation, spiritual or otherwise, on the area. There is room for multiple interpretations, though not all need to be voiced. For example, an evangelical Christian group seeking to 'claim Clare for Christ' would cause much offence were this both known and then interpreted to suggest that Christ were not already present in the lives and communities of those who live there.

### ***Blending Traditions***

While some walkers are attached to no Christian tradition, from experience, the majority have come from one of them. This leads to the third aspect of prayer-walking, that the activity cuts across traditional divisions, engaging with rather than avoiding those features with a history that jars against the contemporary social and religious ethos. For example:

- In West Clare, there is the nineteenth-century Little Ark of Kilbaha, a wooden altar on a cart which was wheeled below the tideline because the parish priest was prevented from saying Mass on land.

**Figure 5 : Kilfenora, North Clare**



Source: Author



- The Corofin Heritage Centre in mid-Clare preserves the Bible pierced by a bullet aimed at a local Protestant evangelist, whose servant was killed in the same attack.
- The communal Famine grave at Kildysert in South Clare has a memorial stone commemorating those who died rather than 'pervert' (become Protestant).

Historically, these sites tell complex stories of contested heritage, however, the fact that many such historical ruins are so old that they can be regarded as part of the common heritage - and cost of their preservation is certainly the common responsibility - theoretically makes interpretation at these sites easier.

### **Responsibility**

A fourth attraction to prayer-walking is that it is perceived as light on the natural environment. The taking of a holiday in one's own country or a nearby one, may be an ecological decision. The cost of accommodation and meals means that a holiday of this kind may not be financially cheaper than one abroad, but might be regarded as more desirable, as well as a healthy option. Further, bringing modest amounts of money to a rural locality enables the residents to remain and manage the local resources, and this is seen as benefitting the wider society. Thus, the history of pilgrimage as holiday, something to be undertaken on one or more holy days, days of relaxation from the normal round of work, is present. Socially-expected relaxation becomes relaxation with God, a perceived means of enjoying life in a way that does not cost the earth.

Living more lightly brings us to the final motivation behind these walks. The environmental is one of the themes of a movement that fascinates many who come, the celebration of the 'Celtic' heritage.

The current form of Celtic spirituality has been around for a generation, and has refined and developed popular understanding of how heritage, real or perceived, can be valued, and give a sense of continuity and refreshment. While there is often a very loose relationship between the modern movement with its suppositions and what we know of early Irish religious practice, or indeed recent folk tradition, modern Celtic spirituality has proved remarkably resilient. In its Irish form there is a recognition of the ancient prayers and poetry of Ireland, of the significance to local people of the historical religious sites, most of which have been reused down the centuries for burials, and acknowledgement of the ongoing folk tradition. Interest was greatly increased through the writings of the County Clare native John O'Donohue (1956-2008).

As well as respect for the environment, understood as valuing the natural world in its own right, as an aspect of creation and beautiful, other 'Celtic' themes resonate with modern pilgrimage. There is the emphasis on the early saints, who are seen as models and as people who lived close to the world of birds and land animals. Interpretations made of their *Lives*, later hagiographical accounts, encourage an appreciation of place, in particular places which have been deemed sanctified by continuing pilgrimage. Another aspect is that the saints who left their own land to travel become models for the modern walker.

### **Challenges and Learnings**

The responses to these pilgrimage walks have identified something significant in the understanding of local group pilgrimage - a question of ownership. This is not only about sites in public care, access and local traditions of use, for example for burials. It includes interpretations and who has the right to provide them. The innate parochialism of the west of Ireland is another major factor. There is also, more prosaically the fear of losing money for signage and of status within the local community if one group is seen to predominate over others.

Moreover, not all the interpretations of sites may agree with the views of local historians nor with those of academic historians and archaeologists. Modern understandings of what constitutes Celtic spirituality are not automatically open to debate, and while vernacular pilgrimage may continue alongside without reference to any such considerations, the questions of intellectual ownership need consideration where pilgrim routes or planned walks are offered to people from beyond the immediate area and tradition.

One unforeseen consequence noted in the development of the walks described here was the reaction of people from overseas who have settled in Ireland in recent years. African perceptions of what was happening and why, brought in a new dimension. While the concept of pilgrimage was not unfamiliar, the approach to the historical sites was very different. To many Africans, stopping at sites of interest that contained graves, including recently opened ones, was considered unusual, and pausing to eat there was culturally unacceptable. At another level, landmarks whose background and function were taken as understood, like the Loop Head lighthouse, were not immediately comprehensible to people whose origins lay in landlocked countries.

The process of developing group pilgrimage also led to the development of alternative Catholic-led or 'Inter-Faith' (predominantly former Catholic and modern Pagan) pilgrimage routes. At the same time, there is a desire found in different sectors to form tourism-

friendly linked routes similar to the linked routes of the Continent. The perception is that tourist boards (who often favour such routes) are businesses engaged with relatively short-term goals, are rather dismissive of the spiritual and historical, and thus, are unsuited to delicate work with local communities. This may be among one of the most difficult challenges to overcome.

There may be tensions concerning vernacular pilgrimage sites, especially if maintenance ceases to be in the hands of a certain local family, as was common, and for funding and other reasons becomes the role of a local community group. There are also considerations of long-term maintenance, as public funding is inclined to involve only short-term projects with identifiable outcomes. There is also the potential tension between what is considered intimate and local, and the requirements of public funding that holy wells and similar sites be marked for other tax-payers, and tourists, in this very Catholic approach to Irish culture.

### Conclusion

In summary, there are tensions which identify the need for careful development. Like the *King of Mysteries* poem quoted earlier, many of the sites were built and have survived for a variety of reasons, and there are layers of interpretation associated with them already. Historical guides add to the interest and understanding of the complexity of heritage, but there are questions of who decides the routes and who decides the interpretations.

The great European pilgrim ways developed over centuries and had the force of the universal western Church to maintain them and their hostelries. Starting from a different point, modern attempts to recreate such an experience need consideration of many aspects, including signed routes; affordable food; suitable accommodation, with for example drying facilities; 'badging' and privileged rates for pilgrims; and reasonable access to and interpretation of, historical sites. .

The common purpose of pilgrimage is to follow the ancient tradition of walking together, to a destination. The journey is as important as the arriving. It provides time to use the body for the purpose of prayer and relaxation, and a chance to share knowledge and skills with the stranger on the road. In places where such walks are developing, there is a variety of models and motivations. As a way of expressing current spiritual desires through the sacred sites and prayers of the past, organisers may be offering something that enables others on their own quest, or may be offering interpretations, which satisfy, or irritate.

These are only the immediate issues that the Clare experience raised. Many questions remain on how to develop pilgrimage, with local acceptance of the routes and interpretations, in a way that is comprehensible to as many walkers as possible. /what is clear is that pilgrimage in its various guises will continue.

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